AIN'T I A WOMAN?

may 74 25¢

queers ~~and childcare~~

poems

old maids

old maids
pieces of popcorn that don't pop
remain hard kernels

the salty buttery light corns at the top
get gobbled up first
the old maids sit
at the bottom of the bowl
last to go

i don't want to be
seasoned and oiled
and blown full of nothing

i want
to resist frying and shaking
to escape being consumed and destroyed
and remian tough in my essence

if you eat me I hope you choke

GAIL CHANDLER

LI Feminia
Serial
Am
A296

1-23-76

... you don't become a mother

by being a lesbian

The two sections of this article were written at different times. I've tried to clean them up, but I'm still not comfortable with them. I've tried 11 or 12 times to write something about lesbians and childcare, but I think I'm still too angry. My anger seems to confuse me rather than strengthen me on this issue. I think class and heterosexism have been major contradictions in the daycare hassles I have been a part of. I'm hoping that someone will run down class separately the way I'm gonna try to do heterosexism separately. I suppose, many people (most?) are sick of hearing this stuff; I don't know what I can do about that.

1. Written shortly after the close of the last center I worked at.

One of the things that has torn the community I work in apart is the issue of male children and how lesbians should relate to them. I don't think lesbians should have to relate to white male children at all. A woman who finds herself with a male child and a growing feminist consciousness, should be supported in finding alternative care for the child. For some lesbians, even that much relationship is too much, and the need for that distance should be respected. I want to try to talk from a childless lesbian's point of view and not start qualifying everything I have to say, because as usual, even a lesbian community, has placed the needs of childless lesbians last.

WHITE MALE CHILDREN OPPRESS ADULT FEMALES. Boy children do oppress female children, but they also oppress female adults. Some examples. When the kids at daycare climbed all over the adults, the mother of one of the boys objected that he was discouraged from 'exploring' the breasts of the women he was in contact with. Since, in my experience at least, female children have been discouraged from touching the sexual parts of adult males, it seems to me that this mother was re-inforcing sex differential treatment. Boys are socialized to believe that any woman is a potential cuddle. They act on that belief.

Boy children who deal with lesbians who prefer to relate to female children intrude themselves on the adult women in inventive ways since they are accustomed to a lion's share of attention and resources.

The knowledge that a woman in the group has male children can and has prevented feminists and lesbians from even talking about their hatred of men. This is what an ostensibly powerless "little boy" can do to a group of adult females.

The smallest boys acting in a group will harass a solitary adult woman. Why is it that if a single woman passes 2 young females on the street she is not conscious of any alert going off in her. If she passes 2 boys she is on the alert because they could as easily attack her verbally, or run their bikes or hands into her as pass her by peaceably. In all the years I rode the subway I never saw bands of female children terrorizing other passengers. I'm speaking of males under 10 years of age. The nature of institutionalized sexism is such that whatever kids as a class do to even the score against adults as a class, they do to female adults because they understand and act on the power differential between men and women.

SOLUTIONS SHORT OF FINDING ALTERNATIVE CARE FOR WHITE MALE CHILDREN ARE INDIVIDUAL.

Even supposing that a remarkable male child having been given remarkable care, finds the super human strength to resist the support for male chauvinism that he sees on television, in his family situation, with relatives, neighbors and peers, and that he gets at school staring at age 7 or at pre-school that much earlier--even supposing he was able to resist the institutionalized pressure to believe he was a stripe above ordinary humans, that effort would have been an individual solution which would do nothing to effect radical change.

I think it is sick for lesbian feminists to wring their hands over the plight of white male children or women who have male children. One mother of male children went so far as to say that she and her children needed more help from feminists than women with female kids.

Sometimes dykes who have rejected dealing with male children are challenged to provide alternative care for them. At one center where I worked the most hostile dyke care was preferred, by at least one mother of a male child, to care by any men. How are lesbians to deal with that! It is not the responsibility of lesbians to seek out or provide care for males of any age. Some lesbians will find themselves forced to deal with this situation, but for any woman to urge dykes to take on this responsibility is cruelly insensitive to where lesbians are coming from i.e. it is heterosexist.

I THINK LESBIANS ARE STRONG AND "INDEPENDENT" -- AND I KNOW HOW WE GOT THERE.

I'm intrigued by the thinking of women who claim it's a privelege to have to create your life daily out of a hostile environment--without children, but who will not act to become members of this 'priveleged caste'. We know enough not to say of Third World People and women in general that the solidarity they are developing is a privelege. The literature about the oppression of mother is copious. It enables women who are childless to pay at least lip service to the oppression of mothers. In this community with only a couple of exceptions the mothers of male children and many of the mothers of female children did not and still do not even pay lip service to lesbian oppression. Even women who became both mothers and lesbians in the women's movement ignore lesbian oppression because they have not experienced it in a way that closes their eyes forever on white males of any age.

2. Written after repeated provocation.

Such as gratitutious heterosexist insults from the son of a woman I was seeing, that she consistently found amusing.

Such as the mother of this boy saying it oppressed her to hear anti-male comments. "He's not a man; he's my son." To which I never had it together to reply in person that every fucker was somebody's son. Such as, a mother I was seeing coming down on me for having what she called 'bachelor (dig it) bachelor priveleges' i.e. I could walk away from her and her kids at my whim. She was seeing a dude at the same time, I don't think she noticed any contradiction in seeing both a man and a woman when she accused me of exercising my numerous options.

Such as the mother of a child who I, with a couple of others, had taken permanent responsibility for, wrenching her kid away from us and then claiming childless women were 'the enemy'.

Such as childbearing women ripping off working class lesbians for money, that was at best only marginally connected to childrearing.

Such as childbearing women manipulating the guilt of childless lesbians. This is not a liberal guilt, but the guilt of being a lesbian.

Such as in general and in particulars childbearing lesbians and straight mothers treating childless lesbians with contempt under the guise of putting lesbians up against the wall for the privileges their childlessness brings to them. What else is new?

Such as childless lesbians being sucked in by this pigshit and dealing it out to other lesbians who were a little less sucked in. With very few exceptions childbearing women, both lesbian and straight have behaved in a heterosexist way.

Anyway these are some of the things that prompted me to write this part.

A frequent complaint being made around the time public health officials were arranging the collapse of the center was that the women involved owed their troubles to a failure of lesbian consciousness. While I know that the analysis that takes in the most variables is the most useful I would like to concentrate on what I think it means not to have acted in our own interests as lesbians.

I do not think that straight women are the enemy, though at present there is little reason to work with them politically or associate with them socially. A

continued...
service project, however, that urges lesbians to take on regular, reliable, serious energy and financial childcare responsibilities for straight women supports institutionalized heterosexuality. I don't know all the ways this happens, but some are: by placing lesbians in relation to straight women in the heterosexual environment where the lesbian offends everyone and is therefore come down on. It goes without saying that lesbians offend men, but they offend straight mothers by wanting to do too much or too little childcare i.e. mothers see lesbians only as childless women. They define us in terms of themselves and their needs and we accept the politics of those definitions because we've internalized heterosexuality and we don't always understand when or how our space has been violated. What after all can we show, even to each other, as the story of our oppression that can compare to the status, the documented and undocumented horrors of a mother and her children asking for help. I'm so sick of comparing oppressions I could puke.

I never doubted it was oppressive to be a mother; that's why I was willing to go through what I had to go through in order to avoid it. And I would appreciate it if mothers who know a few queers or so-called lesbian mothers would stop talking about homosexuality as though their fashionable, women's liberationist choice (cushioned in feminist communities like in a dream) had anything to do with homosexual oppression. They are obviously correct in seeing a timely inclination to lesbianism as relatively not oppressive. Their experience, it should go without saying, does not tell the whole story about lesbian oppression.

I use the word so-called to describe some lesbians who have children (by no means all) because I think that among the women I work with that combination has served more to muddy the issues of heterosexism, class and the politics of childless and childbearing women than to bridge any gaps between the contradictions.

It is muddy to regard the combined oppressions as a 'double oppression' a usual catch phrase to urge lesbians to do something useful with their free time. Lesbian consciousness is a gift to lesbian mothers for the simple reason that you don't become a mother by being a lesbian. The world is full of mothers and they have a place in it, however wretched. When a lesbian need is in conflict with a maternal need, you need super human strength to act on your own behalf because you cannot marshall the propaganda, the simple air time to compete with motherhood. There are lesbian mothers in my community. They are older women who have had a bellyfull of motherhood. Their needs are regularly ignored. If we belong to each other, childbearing and childless lesbians, it's because the mothers know instinctively or gradually that motherhood needs cannot and should not be a priority in a lesbian community.

That's not to say I approve of mothers' needs being systematically ignored when mothers are part of our community. Most of what I think should happen has happened or is happening. The groups of adults caring for little kids, rotating responsibility, collectives and housing that split the mother and child, mothers and their lovers trying to deal with the contradictions that result from the structural monogamies that form because of and to alleviate childrearing responsibilities, but which serve to aggravate the childrearing responsibilities at the same time as the variation nuclear family is destroying the possibility of a sensible lesbian relation. I am deaf however to pleas about how to welcome, encourage, make it easy for lesbian mothers to join us. I don't want to encourage anyone to come to the community I live in who doesn't need it as much as I do and in the same basic ways.

If children come to our community separate from their mothers, we should obviously relate to them only on our terms--except of course that we can't or those of us with strong relations with minors can't have them. I know this is the way it always comes down on mothers--childless people relate to kids on their own terms; but it always comes down on lesbians to plug into heterosexual dynamics. Whenever lesbians are aware of it they should act in their self interest even if it means taking shit for being selfish, lazy, and privileged (in the sense that heterosexually mothered women say it's a privilege to be queer because you don't have their problems).

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They don't have yours to be sure, but they don't even know what yours are--and the real killer is that you don't always know either. So you get to believe that if you can't explain what fucks you over it obviously couldn't be of much consequence, especially if someone is challenging you to match the obvious oppression of a mother and her children. Two people are easier to see than one--and one dyke doesn't count for much anyway. That's what heterosexism is all about. And this doesn't begin to talk about what lesbians have to go through in actually relating to children.

3. I can't let this article be printed without adding how I feel about childcare now (several months after I wrote the last part). I will not do anymore childcare and I will try to encourage everyone I know to stop doing childcare in and form--collective or individual. By everyone I include lesbian mothers who if they can't reject their childrearing sentence in safer and easier ways, should abandon, desert, run-away-from or neglect motherhood. But most of all I want to encourage old dykes to hold their ground on an area they always understood, and I want to urge newly gay women to get behind lesbian priorities. I know the lesbian-mother is fashionable in feminist circles these days thanks to institutionalized straightness, but I would like to spend some prime political time talking about and acting on the oppression of Queers.

(I HAVE A VERY SMALL GUN,

NOT A MAN-STOPPER, I'M TOLD.)
THE POLICE USE A .38
BUT EVEN THAT DIDN'T KILL GEORGE WALLACE.
WELL, I SAY,
WITH AN ATTEMPT AT SWEETNESS
THAT DOESN'T CONVINCE ME,
I JUST WANT SOMETHING
THAT'LL MAKE A LOUD ENOUGH NOISE
TO SCARE SOMEONE AWAY.
(REMEMBER SELLING GUNS IS A BUSINESS.
THEY'LL TELL YOU WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT HOW BIG A CREEP SHOULD BE DEAD
FROM WHAT WEAPON
AT WHAT RANGE.)
WELL, I JUST WANT SOMETHING
TO MAKE ENOUGH NOISE
TO SCARE SOMEONE AWAY.
A LOT OF WOMEN BUY THIS MODEL.
IT'S SMALL AND CAN BE KEPT IN
THE PURSE OR POCKET.
(BY PLACING MY VERY SMALL GUN
IN THE EAR OF AN ANNOYANCE
I CAN MAKE ENOUGH NOISE
TO SCARE SOMEONE
FAR, FAR AWAY.)

TO BE DONE WITH MOTHERHOOD FOREVER

For years and years, it seems, I've been a mother; and from the very first I've hated it. In my opinion, no part of the motherhood structure is worth preserving. Motherhood oppresses childless lesbians, it oppresses childless straight women, it oppresses mothers and it oppresses children. In one way or another, all women are mutilated by the myth that there is something intrinsically valuable about being a mother. The beauty of a working class lesbian community is its freedom from financial or emotional stakes in mother right; it apparently, therefore, could gleefully wipe mother-right from the face of the earth. And from the perspective of an older and very weary mother, I would wholeheartedly endorse that endeavor.

Motherhood to me has meant guilt, resentment, fragmentation and mutilation. Guilt: because for 15 years the world has blamed my children's flaws on me so that now, the smallest criticism of them goes through me like an electric shock. Resentment: because the financial and emotional needs of my children have forced me to abandon one attempt after another to find my own direction. Fragmentation: because I've moved 25 times and abandoned at least as many "self-fulfillment" projects since my children were born. The realization that I was usually in pursuit of empty class-climbing goals or self-destructive heterosexual objectives only makes those memories more bitter. Especially since I'll probably be working to pay off the gargantuan debt incurred to "make something of myself" long after I'm done supporting my children. Mutilation: because my children developed a debilitating dependence on me (I was finally all they had), and because I was in danger of developing a debilitating dependence on their dependence (having finally been forced to give up everything else.) And most important, mutilation: because motherhood meant I lived in a heterosexual world and never knew the meaning of loving women.

The guilt, resentment, fragmentation and mutilation that most mothers feel grow inevitably from the structures of motherhood. It is amazing to me how often young mothers expect to retain that structure and simply solve their problems with free childcare from childless lesbians. I can only imagine they have not been mothers long enough to grasp the potential danger to themselves in these arrangements, let alone the danger to the childless lesbians they collar to help them.

Demanding childcare assistance from childless women while clinging to the rights and powers of motherhood is like demanding to be Jacqueline Kennedy. That is, you can keep the 'privileges' and divest yourself of the burdens of motherhood without oppressing other women. And this is particularly true if you're asking childless lesbians to help you during the the free time that your mother-right has already turned into a curse.

During most of my motherhood years, I've born the burden of my children alone. Accasionally during those years, I made hysterical attempts to divest myself of the responsibility; but the world made me feel like a moral monstrosity for trying and I never could quite carry it off.

Now, for the past year, childless lesbians have given me financial and emotional support that has made it possible for me and my daughters to live apart. Because this gave the illusion of breaking up the debilitating mother/child dependency, it seemed like a good solution at first. Before long, though, it was painfully obvious this solution was oppressive to the lesbians who were helping us. They were giving time and energy to heterosexual mistakes of the kind that had been oppressing them all their lives; and in the process, they had little energy left over for dealing with their own oppression as lesbians.

In the wake of lesbian anger and resentment about assuming childcare responsibilities for me, I've learned important things about myself as well. Most important, I've come to realize that what I need more than anything else is to be a childless lesbian — that the only solution for me is to walk completely away from my children. It's the only way I can ever get to myself. Concessions to my heterosexuality have only made it easier for me to avoid leaving my children and confronting my own gayness.

I've learned as well that giving priority to childcare contains the erroneous assumption that we all have something valuable to offer to dependent children. Why have we learned so well that economic and sexual dependence destroys women - and not known it about children? Protecting children from the state only weakens all of us. Mothers cannot become strong and independent, nor can lesbians who act as surrogate mothers, nor can children who are being mothered - however liberated their environment may seem.

That is why I now feel the best way to help lesbian mothers - and children - is to help them find ways to be done with motherhood forever.

Nothing Was As It Should've Been

I GAVE HER YELLOW SIGHS
SHE GAVE ME HER DARK CIRCLED EYES
HER DEEPER CRIES
AND A BOX OF LAUGHTER
RESERVED FOR ME
FOR THE LONLIER YEARS TO COME
WHEN WE THOUGHT WE'D BE MARRIED OFF
TO PUT OUR PARENT'S MINDS AT EASE.

INSTEAD THEY PUT HER IN A TEXAS SNAKE PIT
OF A MENTAL HOSPITAL
AND GOT THE DOCTOR WHO WAS GIVING HER SHOCK TREATMENT
TO CALL ME UP AND SAY I WASN'T MAKING HER CRAZY
BUT MY VISITS WERE
HOW WOULD YOU PUT IT?
UPSETTING HER
"SPLIT YOU LESBIAN"
SO AFTER I GOT MY TREATMENT
I CAME TO NEW YORK TERRIFIED
AND TIPTOES OUT OF THE CLOSET,

ANNA BECAME A LIFER ON WARD D.
NOTHING WAS AS IT SHOULD'VE BEEN
THE MOVEMENT CAME TOO LATE
TO SAVE SOME OF US
I CAN'T GET THE PICTURE
OF ANNA READING RAT FROM HER WHITE METAL BED
OUT OF MY MIND.

Susan Cavin
12/10/72

The Bomb

1.

Running from the bombed city
with an infant in one arm
and coffee in the other
and a little girl holding my dress
(I assume the wisdom in a girl
to run alongside)
Running the truck route
out of the city. . .

2.

I am the Comedy of the People
I am the little sin obeying the big sin
to explode my heart.
I am the twitter that screamed
"The Queen is Dead, Long live the Queen"
and have been screaming since.

3.

I prepare for catastrophe
every day,
calling my things nearer a core,
using my arms and
wearing comfortable shoes.

*** Susan Klein

Separation Poem

For those slowdown few minutes
before the gang shows up for
the meeting, i'll
isolate myself
close the bedroom door --
and remember
Remember not
to expect you
to open it on me,
bring me out, first for
yourself (ourself)
then cheerfully "drag me out"
to the meeting. Way to go, honey.
it's a little like
how i love
to wake up
to love
your waking

I wish i had an out
like bitterness
like jealousy
like sorrow
neither of us do,
my love,
what can connect us
is that we are
crying together
not for beauty, not with sadness
crying with rage.

72 8
for simone

although i ache for your pain, your struggle
becoming a woman has never been easy
i did it too
i feel it now
Although i love you and although you excite me
i won't let on, won't let me
become another variable in your conflict
i feel like a haughty old bitch
realizing you'll see, i'm sure you'll see
perhaps a lot of needless pain later
you'll see what i've been trying
to show you
Although i ache for your pain
i won't become a weapon for it
or a cure of it,
won't assume the jealousy i feel
for the men you flatter,
and although i love you for your struggle
i hope not one more day will go by
until you remember you love me
in the wake of all those men.